

The Reluctant Storyteller

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Contents:

<i>Part 1: Negotiating Performance and Contextual Ambiguity</i>	3
<i>Part 2: Defining Terms</i>	11
<i>Part 3: Performing Counter-Hegemonic Authority</i>	13
<i>Part 4: The Ontologies of Context</i>	23
<i>Part 5: Preface to the End</i>	37
<i>Part 6: Towards an Affect-based Analysis</i>	39
<i>Bibliography</i>	45
<i>Transcript</i>	48

The Reluctant Storyteller: *Negotiating Performance and Contextual Ambiguity*

From the first time we spoke, Emil was the self-proclaimed, “reluctant storyteller” and I was the reluctant ethnographer. This mutual reluctance to fill our prescribed roles as informant and researcher acts as a seed of the wonderfully complicated dynamic that has developed over the course of our work together. The latter portion of the text to be analyzed in this essay represents the only significant “breakthrough into performance” that occurred in my conversations with Emil. The complexities of negotiating a suitable storytelling environment proved to be a substantial factor in determining the contextual meaning of the performance text. The interaction between my expectations, as an inexperienced ethnographer, and his developed definition of storytelling as a didactic genre gives rise to a host of contextual complexities. This essay will address 1) the conversational negotiation of our disparate, subjective notions of context, 2) the reality of performed context as an actively created shared space and 3) how the fluidity of contextual meaning makes reflexive analysis an inadequate tool for recreating the experiential meaning of performance.

Before we begin, here is the story behind our story, a short contextual recreation of my side of the reluctance. I came to know Emil while working on an independent study in the spring of '07. Previously I had done some work with local storytellers who perform in elementary schools, which sparked my interest in creating interactive experience as a powerful epistemological base. The burgeoning theory in the study of early childhood development (best represented by the educational philosophy named the Reggio Emilia Approach after the region in Spain where it originated) privileges the interaction between the child and his or her environment as the basis for learning and positions teachers and students as joint participants in the process of development. In many ways, the use of storytelling in public schools reflects this approach

towards development and the acquisition of knowledge. No longer should the educational environment be dictated by the teacher in order to transmit a preselected body of knowledge.

We must learn through shared experience: teachers and students, parents and children.

The burning question, in my mind, after observing roomfuls of children listen wide-eyed and laugh along to the lessons and values that storytellers performed for them: how would this structure look if it could be enacted and repeated within the walls of higher education? Seeking a space where we might practice what was preached, where we might perform the theory of our books through the life of a discussion, two other students and I found our way into an independent study of ethnographic methods with Dr. Margaret Mills

Our intense discussions in Dr. Mills's little office would leave me feeling alternately invigorated and overwhelmed. Some days I left her office feeling like my head might pleasantly explode from new perspectives, other days I felt like I was drowning in the discourse. With all the ethics and obstacles of qualitative research, apathy (or worse yet, paralysis) seems to be an inevitable endpoint to the circular discussions of who may represent whom and how. Or perhaps, how power dynamics are negotiated between researchers and *their* informants and who is actually served by the academic proliferation of localized or endangered traditions. Of course, the list of ideological and methodological issues in ethnography goes on and on. The freedom, as scholars and students, to problematize the methods and purpose of our discipline provides the grounds for countless stimulating conversations and academic papers, but the risk of becoming stranded in the meta—miles from practicality—seems to be an ever-present and unproductive possibility. How can we integrate the theoretical conundrums of qualitative research with the meaningful experience of practically encountering them?

I do not intend any of these statements as a serious, rigorous critique of qualitative disciplines but merely a representation of the subjective set of values I was negotiating in my mind when I made initial contact with Emil. As a result of my uncertainty towards the social functions and merits of ethnography, I entered my own research with a reluctance to formalize the exchange, a reluctance to establish my role as ethnographer with any authority. In my first visit with Emil, it never felt right to take the tape recorder out of the bag. Yet, after a few hours of great conversation and not gathering a single text, I left his house feeling positively inspired.

For me, *ethnography* is the immediate edification of those involved in the exchange of information. At the time the texts used in this paper were recorded, Emil was nearing his 90th birthday, me my 21st. Before we ever even spoke, he represented a source of knowledge and a potential means of understanding my identity as a young man and folklorist. Not only is he an acting expert for my academic study of storytelling, but having more than quadruple the life experience, Emil is a valuable resource for all kinds of worldly wisdom. But the most intriguing aspect of Emil, to me (a self-aware figure stuck in the liminal bowels of late collegiate in-between-hood), is his ability to reinvent himself in accordance with a selected set of unfamiliar values.

At the age of seventy and prompted by a New Yorker article on storyteller Ray Hicks, Emil decided to leave his cozy life in Ohio to attend a Graduate Program in Storytelling at East Tennessee State University. His wife of many, many years had died just a couple of years prior. He had just retired from a workshop-style consulting job that he loved and felt like he needed a new path in life. The program at ETSU played a critical role in Emil's development as a storyteller; a means of turning a spontaneous, newfound interest into a lifestyle. Responding to a question of whether he could have become a storyteller if not for his time in the program he said,

“[Yes] but I would not have had the formal education that I think I needed to give me a background in why storytelling is important...An education in storytelling, at least it was for me anyways, gave me an understanding of the meaning, purpose and value of it and depth of it. And to a lesser extent how to do it.” The university acted as a medium for communicating values between Emil and a world of traditions that he didn’t even know existed until he read the article on Ray Hicks and started attending storytelling festivals. The graduate program not only provided a channel for values, it also supplied a classroom community of storytellers and the forum to creatively hone his performance style. The formal values he was taught within the community of developing storytellers and the practical experience at the university seem to have provided the basis for Emil to form his own personal set of storytelling values.

One facet of his value set, which he and I have discussed several times, is a three-part definition of the storyteller’s responsibility. The storyteller is responsible to himself, to the story, and to the audience. In order for a storytelling performance to be appropriate and successful, all three parts of this definition must be respected and the integrity of each entity should be maintained through the collective experience of the event. The responsibility to the audience indicates the need to affect them with a lesson contained in the story. The storyteller is responsible to the story because specific stories implicitly contain specific lessons, which are defined when transmitted from one person or generation to another. If a storyteller misaligns these proper components of a fruitful performance, he risks jeopardizing his own identity and the very utility of performing in first place, thus the responsibility of the teller to himself.

When Emil discusses the responsibility of storytelling he is addressing contextual issues, particularly that the story must be told in a world where it can be interpreted correctly. He appreciates the didactic capacity of the experience as one of the chief values and purposes of

storytelling. An accessible and agreed upon context greatly determines an audience's ability to extract the proper morals from the text of a story. If Emil thinks that a potential performance setting is inconducive to a meaningful experience for an audience he will simply decline. His respect for a properly negotiated performance context serves as a source of his reluctance to tell stories. He says, "If someone asks me to tell a story, my usual response is that I'll think about it." Emil made this remark in reference to past experiences, but its relevance to our interaction seemed undeniable, and, being informed of how he responds to such context, I decided not to blatantly ask for a telling during my first visit.

In a phone conversation, I prefaced my second visit to Emil's with the need to record a text to transcribe and analyze for my research class. There was no mention of recording a performance, only that I would like to run a tape-recorder while we talked. I was also returning a cassette tape of his stories that he had let me borrow after my first visit. He produced the tape while at ETSU and it contains six stories including an autobiographical track entitled "Storyteller's Odyssey", which depicts his experience of driving to Tennessee to start a new life. Listening to the tape on my way home from our first meeting, I felt like I had spent the past few hours speaking with Emil's mild-mannered alter ego. Even though he had already narrated these same experiences to me, our conversation lacked something that was on the tape. The tone of his voice was deeper and more dynamic, stylized refrains and whimsical little songs enhanced the emotional content of the narrative. In the ten minutes it took to listen to the tape in my car, I felt I had learned more about Emil than in three preceding hours. I had it in the back of my mind to coax out a retelling of one of these stories in order to make my own recording of a performance and possibly compare it with the tape he had given me.

The performance I eventually recorded was not one of the stories on the tape but rather a “family story” and one that he does not tell very often. Just why he chose to tell this particular story was not obvious when I went to analyze the text afterwards. The performance arose rather organically from the context of a conversation and importantly was not a response to a direct request for a story. This surrounding conversation and segue into performance is the area in which Emil and I negotiate the proper performance environment. After transcribing the conversation it became apparent that the performance occurs at the point in the conversation when both of our expectations for the context of a meaningful performance were met.

We sat at his kitchen table, and after making a weak joke about it, I took my tape recorder out of my pocket and set it between us. Emil had commented once before that he had no problem with being recorded but was not sure if he would be of any use to me or have what I was looking for. Due in part to his comment, but also due to my own uncertainty as to what exactly I was looking for, I had no formal list of questions to structure the interview. The conversation meandered through topics: imagination, the purpose of stories, the effects of modern media, a bit about a story he is currently developing, before we turned again to his time spent at ETSU. He began to speak about a professor at the university who played a significant part in influencing his early storytelling career. In lines 10-22 of the transcript he comments on how she thought he was a “pretty good storyteller, which helped [his] storytelling career considerably.” He then introduced a concept that would dominate the conversation for the next several minutes and eventually segue into a performance: “She was my storytelling Pygmalion./ Everybody in this world needs a Pygmalion,” (23-24).

The way Emil describes “...a psychological principle called the Pygmalion Effect,” provides his definition of how interpersonal motivation works. “People will behave as they

sense they're expected to behave/ and if the expector gives them a sense that,/ Hey you're pretty damn good.../That gives them the sense of expectations/ and they have a tendency to follow that expect.../ that sense of expectation/ and grow because of it,"(39-48). The main factor in this definition is not expectations but the "sense of expectations."

Emil's stress and repetition of the word "sense" implies that the Pygmalion Effect functions on subjective terms rather than directly from objective, external realities. *The Effect* functions on a correspondence of individual subjectivities, an overlap of at least two sensors, two experiencers. Emil's reinvention of himself worked on this principle. By defining the Pygmalion Effect in terms of a subjective sense of context, it effectively becomes a process for internalizing values. This was my immediate impression during the conversation, prompting me to comment on how the *Effect* could be useful in reinventing oneself (64). Contrary to my comment, Emil responded by saying, "Or if you're looking,/ more particularly/ if you're looking to influence the behavior of other people," (66-68). This confusion reveals a deeper implication of Emil's comments on expectations. Context, as it is experienced, is a subjective and fluid notion, something that is negotiated in an individual's mind through the interaction of expectations; context is not an objective reality that maintains its full meaning in reflective discourse. I erred through my prescriptive definition of context in terms of Emil's prior reinvention of himself, neglecting to recognize the implications of negotiating context in the immediate circumstances of our conversation. For Emil, the Pygmalion Effect is not an isolated event in his past but an affective tool for understanding interpersonal discourse. In this sense, the Pygmalion Effect serves as both the topic of our conversation and an active force on the perceived contexts surrounding it. Without my realizing it at the time, we were simultaneously discussing objective events in the past while meta-narrating the contextual nature of our present interaction.

The foundation of our relationship is based on my identity as a folklore student and Emil's identity as a professional storyteller. These specific identities are somewhat arbitrary in the grandest sense of what makes both of us who we are, but in the special circumstances in which we met these are the two most glaring tags that we carried with us when we first met. These identities are unavoidably attached to both of us, and there are corresponding sets of expectations that can be understood perhaps only in the most fundamental sense. That is, the storyteller tells stories and the ethnographer collects them. We were both negotiating personal sets of values that had been imparted to us through formal education. Emil has internalized the set of values that he encountered at ETSU. This was facilitated by his storytelling Pygmalion and has provided him with a very meaningful identity as a storyteller for the past twenty years. I am still navigating my way through the hegemonic values that are presented to me institutionally and may eventually define my personal and professional identity.

My immediate personal investment in the conversation prompted the question recorded in the transcription. "So is there no.../authentic self then? I guess, is there never.../ is there nothing to us that isn't just a, you know,/ a response to the context that we're performing for at the time?" (133-137). This question seems to represent the point at which our divergent notions of context finally converge. My interest in the potential of an ethnographic experience to provide immediate edification and personal identity is reflected in this question. This personal inquiry also fulfills Emil's values toward a proper storytelling context; his three-part definition of responsibility finds footing in this invitation for a didactic analysis of the self. The deep existential implications of my question came off awkwardly in my perception of the ongoing conversation but opened the door for Emil to teach a lesson through performance. His first response to my question was a chuckle that made me think to myself, *What a stupidly strange*

question...How could anyone answer that? But then Emil showed me how he answers existential questions when he said, “That brings to mind a family story...”(147). This conversational text surrounding the performance circumvents our mutual reluctance as ethnographer and storyteller to blatantly elicit a performance. Context is fluidly defined and negotiated until individual subjectivities align, at which point the environment is fit for performance and the transmission of values.

So far, the text reveals two different models of interpersonal discourse and the negotiation of context. First: the Pygmalion Effect as defined by Emil. That is, a tool or process by which outside expectations are subject to an individual’s interpretation, and behavior then conforms to the subjective notion of context. The second model presents itself in the confusion caused by inconsistencies between separate notions of context as imposed on an interaction by individual actors. These inconsistencies are revealed particularly in the analytic review of an objectified text. Transcribing the negotiation of context to a piece of paper creates the space where multiple layers of meaning can be identified. However, the question remains: Do any of these layers hold any weight when separated from the contextual networks that act upon the original ethnographic encounter?

Defining Terms

Rather than using formal or academic theory (i.e., Briggs or Goffman or Tedlock or Hymes), this performance will be analyzed using the “folk theory” developed in the conversation that prompted it. Because of the specific nature of the theory, we need to specify the meaning certain terms as they will be used here as compared to the established body of critical theory. First off all: hegemony. According to Raymond Williams, “hegemony” in the oldest and broadest sense, “describe[s] a policy expressing or aimed at political predominance.” In relation

to Marxism and the work of Gramsci, the term was expanded from “political predominance of relations between states to relations between social classes.” Hegemony becomes a more and more specific term as it refers to smaller and more specific collectivities or institutions.

Basically the work of this essay expands “hegemony” down to the smallest possible political terms, the relations between the individual and the group.¹ *Hegemony* (as it will be used from this point forward in all its various tenses) refers to any collectivity that determines the context of the individual. Embedded in this definition are two more concepts that need to be defined in relation to the conversational theory: *context of the individual* and *what determines context*.

The context of the individual (according to Emil’s *Pygmalion Effect* theory) is his or her sense of what he or she is expected to do. As discussed earlier, context is subjective. *The Pygmalion Effect* is the experiential mechanism that enacts hegemonic norms; in order for behavior to be altered by the political expectations of a hegemon, the individual must get a sense of what those expectations might be. This is the role of the *Effect* in relation to hegemony. *Pygmalion Effected* behavior facilitates the internalization of norms created and traditionally reinforced by a group of people who experience the world from a common place. According to its specific use here, there are a multitude of hegemonic forces that might, at any given time, act on the politics of a social interaction. Wherever there is a group; whether it is a family, a classroom, an educational institution, a congregation or a nation; there is hegemonic force acting on the individual through his or her subjective sense how he or she is expected to behave. Before two or more individuals negotiate the contextual ambiguity of an unprecedented social interaction, the behavior of each corresponds to a group or network of groups that lies outside the immediate collectivity of the experience. When Emil and I first met, we behaved as we sensed we were expected to behave, but this had far less to do with relating to each other as it did with

¹ Raymond Williams, Keywords, pg 145.

each of us relating to what we had previously learned about how to behave in a particular situation.

The Pygmalion Effect is not an active force on every interaction between people. For example, a person standing in line at the bank is probably more affected by a sense of proper bank behavior that comes from standing in line next to his or her parents as a child or watching movies about bank robberies than he or she is by the personal expectations of the other individuals in the room. *The Pygmalion Effect* refers to “the overthrow of a specific hegemony. [...] This can only be done, it is argued, by creating an alternative hegemony—a new predominant practice and consciousness.”² *Performance*, in the sense that it is used in this essay, refers to these moments of creation. These moments follow the negotiation of contextual ambiguities between two or more separate hegemonic networks, to the point where individuals are behaving according to what they expect of one another. At this point, we are faced with a shift in the nature of context. The following analysis explores performance as a particular type of experience that actively defines context by producing a new collectivity, thereby shifting hegemony to the immediate, interpersonal level.

Performing Counter-hegemonic Authority

From our critical perspective, performance begins when *The Pygmalion Effect* becomes an observable force within the text. “That brings to mind a family story...”(147). At this point, Emil begins to behave according the predominant expectations that I brought into the ethnography. Namely, storytellers tell stories. The fact that, by the point in time when I recorded this particular line, Emil and I had already created a basis of common experience (our previous meeting, the stories he’d given me on the tape, etc...) complicates the context. Not

² Raymond Williams, Keywords, pg 145.

only was Emil a storyteller, he was a reluctant storyteller, an identity he had established early and reinforced throughout the history of our relationship. On the other side of things, Emil's set of predominant expectations towards me were determined not only by his previous life experience (including an education that familiarized him with the vocabulary of Folklore and the academic study of storytelling) but also the conversations between he and I, in which I expressed my doubts and general reluctance to embrace my identity as an ethnographer. The performance, as an active creation of a new hegemonic power, functions as such because Emil and I are in line with both the intrinsic and extrinsic expectations for one another. We are behaving according to the context of both our previous relation to one another and our previous relation the larger world of educational institutions, family values and important life experiences. To support the proposed theoretical framework, we need to find ways in which the text of the performance creates an "alternative hegemony—a new predominant practice and consciousness."³

The lines immediately following, "That brings to mind a family story..."(147) reveal that the performance will not function as a simple reinforcement of our conversation about the *Pygmalion Effect*. Emil qualifies the frame as "[a story] about (umm)/ values/ and how we behave, sometimes/ contrary to what we've learned..."(148-151). These lines seem to speak to my question about an "authentic self", something deeper than a contextual performer, something more fundamental than a subjective copycat. The capacity to act "contrary to what we've learned" contradicts Emil's definition of the Pygmalion Effect, namely that, "People will behave as they're expected to behave,"(39). The performance of narrative within a socially negotiated context supplies the performer with the authority to construct reality counter to the hegemonic norms that govern non-performative time and space.

³ Williams, Keywords, pg 145.

When Emil transitions into performance he has the freedom to behave independent of the system of subjective interpersonal control that he defined earlier. Statements like, "...it's a family story./ It's a true story,"(163-164) establish a reference to objects and events that happened independent of the immediate ethnographic experience we shared. Once the performance is framed in the appropriately negotiated context, the content of the narrative does not continue to conform to the expectations of the audience. This counter-hegemonic freedom through the act of performance functions at several levels in the text that Emil performed.

The fluid progression of meaning as perceived in immediate experience cannot provide the reflective potential of a static text. With a transcribed text we can read and re-read what was said rather than reacting instantaneously to how something is said and how we sense we should react. It was not until *after* I had transcribed both the conversation and performance and had the privilege to compare specific language of each that I became aware of inconsistencies between them. The most important clash of concepts occurs between the conversational definition of the Pygmalion Effect and the notion introduced in the performance of "what we've learned". The word "learn" is not mentioned once in Emil's definition of the *Pygmalion Effect*. As previously stated, the *Effect* is a means of internalizing values and constructing identity. It would seem that this process could be made synonymous with "learning", and I may have linked these terms subconsciously during my first hearing of the story. Because I could not compare the specific language of the performance with that of the conversational context during the experience, the transition into performance was relatively seamless and certainly did not strike me as contradictory.

A comparative, intra-textual analysis reveals that terms used in conversation and performance are not synonymous, in fact quite the opposite. The performance highlights an

important difference between learned values and internalized values (per the Pygmalion Effect).

"...One of the values we were taught as children was that/ (umm) family or relationships should take precedence over material things and goods,"(154-156). With "family" representing the dominant narrated social group, this anti-materialistic doctrine serves as a hegemonic value. The main character in the story eventually acts contrary to hegemonic values, suggesting that while what we internalize through interpersonal motivation may reinforce predominant values, performed narrative provides a space for demonstrating counter-hegemonic behavior. By demonstrating these behaviors with the acknowledged artifice of performance, an individual does not need to fear negative social consequences.

The plot of Emil's story exemplifies the counter-hegemonic space of performance based on the high position and positive judgment he grants its main character from the very start. His performance narrates his Aunt Dallas telling a story about when she contradicted hegemonic family values. Emil states, "My Aunt Dallas is my favorite aunt,"(168). In this statement Emil establishes the foundation of an active *Pygmalion Effect* within the narrative. I make this claim by layering the statement from the performance over the conversational context, "...if the expector gives them a sense that,/Hey you're pretty damn good.../they have a tendency to follow.../that sense of expectation,"(41-47). Emil performs himself as a *Pygmalion* within the world of the narrative. Positive expectations of his favorite aunt, prompt her to behave a certain way that corresponds with her sense of his expectations. His performance juxtaposes his aunt's primary actions, those in the setting where he and she physically interacted, with her narrated actions, which are exhibited through a story she tells him. Importantly, his favorite aunt's primary actions, those that are affected by Emil's *Pygmalion Effect*, remain consistent with the

anti-materialistic family value throughout the entire performance. Her narrated actions directly counter this value.

Emil describes stopping by her house one day just because he was in the neighborhood and wanted to say hello. As any favorite aunt would, she excitedly invites him over and welcomes him to her home. "When I got there, she had/ the table was laden with all sorts of goodies./ She'd brought in her two daughters and/ there was cakes and cookies and coffee and tea and iced tea/ with lemon and sandwiches and hot/ she had everything laid out,"(187-192). This description of his aunt adheres to hegemonic values. She generously provides "a veritable feast" (195) because she values family (him) over material possessions (food). The description of the feast is contained within the performance and has elements of a heightened structure (____and____and ____and____and____), which is not present in Emil's conversational discourse. Even though these lines are part of the narrative performance, within the world of the performance, the scene exists at a level of meta-narrative.

Ironically this scene is strikingly similar to that of my own experience: listening to a narrative performed by an elder, while sitting in his kitchen drinking his coffee and using his things. From the previous analysis of our conversation, it is already established that Emil respects the *Pygmalion Effect* as a dominant force in such an interaction. As such, his favorite Aunt Dallas does not violate family values in this meta-layer of the performance because Emil himself is a member of the family and promotes the corresponding hegemonic values through his positive expectations. Counter-hegemonic action exists only in the deepest layer of narration, which is framed by one of Dallas's daughters saying, "Mom, tell Emil (um)/ the story about the ring,"(201-202). In his performance for me, Emil narrates his own primary experience with his aunt, as well as the primary experience of his aunt, which she narrated to him. Emil's experience

is termed the *meta-layer of the performance* because it is a narrative about the context of a narration, representing the nature and texture of conversational discourse. Aunt Dallas's experience gets performed in light of two layers of narration: hers to Emil and Emil's to me. As such, Emil performs her experience as a representation of the potential of performed narrative.

This story within the story presents the time and space where *learned values* are violated. "The story about the ring," centers on what Aunt Dallas calls, "one of the most beautiful wedding bands I'd ever seen." She says, "I always thought that someday/ if I was the oldest one in the family/ and my mother died, I would be entitled to that ring,"(228-230). These lines immediately precede a pair of refrains, which are repeated three times throughout the performance with slight variations. The two refrains illustrate the contrast between the nature of conversational discourse and performed narrative. To the right of each refrain, I indicate which character speaks each line and at which level of the narrative.

Refrain 1: Don't you think so?	<i>[Meta-Dallas]</i>
And I said	<i>[Emil the narrator]</i>
Well, I certainly do.	<i>[Emil the character]</i>

Refrain 2: Well, that's not what happened.	<i>[Meta-Dallas]</i>
I said	<i>[Emil the narrator]</i>
Well, what happened.	<i>[Emil the character]</i>

Lines: (231-233, 236-238) (259-261, 263-265) (281-283)

The refrains mark a transition into and out of the meta-world of the performance. Emil performs the deeper narrative through the voice of his aunt, but these refrains mark a switch of the narrator. The speaking subject in the lines preceding the refrain is Aunt Dallas. The "I" in

the refrains refers to Emil. Within his performance, Emil switches back and forth between different times and places such that his audience becomes aware of the conversational context surrounding the story within the story. Beyond marking transitions between narrators and narratives, the refrains offer comments on the respective capabilities of conversational discourse and performed narrative.

The first refrain functions on subjective terms very similar to the model of interpersonal motivation that Emil defines as the Pygmalion Effect. In the three lines, everything is defined in terms of the two subjects present in the interaction, “Don’t *you/ I* certainly do.” The language focuses on the negotiation of context between the teller and hearer of the story. Dallas elicits confirmation that Emil agrees with her point of view and he responds in his own subjective voice. The textural nature of Emil’s performance during these refrains made me laugh when I heard him initially and contributes to the establishment of an interpersonal dynamic between the characters in the narrative. The three lines in the first refrain were delivered in quick succession, with the next right on the tail of the one before. The effect of this was the impression of two close friends bantering back and forth as if they know what the other is thinking. The performance of these lines was styled in a way that sounded like Emil could not have contradicted his aunt even if he had disagreed with her. The repetition of these lines in a similar tone throughout the performance reinforced this impression that Emil and his aunt affected one another with their positive expectations towards each other. In their conversational discourse Emil and his aunt cannot contradict one another.

In his aunt’s performed narrative, contradicting expectations is not only possible but indeed the point of the story. This gets reflected in the second refrain. The transition is from a state of harmony and agreement in the first refrain to the negation of expectations in the second.

“Well that’s **not** what happened,”(236), suggesting that within a performed narrative, events can occur independent of the expectations of the audience. From a critical perspective, narrative is a retroflexive process that gives spatial and temporal reality a static objective existence on the authority that, “This actually happened.” This authority is the basis for the practice of suspended disbelief that occurs whenever an individual reads, hears, or otherwise experiences narrative. Emil’s question at the end of the second refrain encapsulates the authority that is granted to narrative. “Well, what happened?” This is a stock question of qualitative interviews, a straightforward invitation to narrative, and Emil performs this question as a device that plunges the performance back into the deepest level of narration.

Following the second refrain, the narrative is back in his aunt’s voice. This occurs at lines 240, 267, 285, and 353. Several layers of who said what and of whom emerge confusingly in the transitions in and out of the frame. Emil always says, “She said” before getting back into the deepest narrative level, from where he can speak as Dallas and bring in another person who says something else. The speakers are not always explicitly noted, so that “she” may refer to three different people within the span of a few lines and distinction between different persons is accomplished only through changes of tone and pace.

When including myself and the ethnographic process, there are three layers of narration (Emil said, Dallas said, they said). This layering of narration heightens the system of referential authority depicted in the second refrain. These layered frames also provide a source of confusion and ambiguity as I attempt to analyze the transcribed performance and recreate experiential meaning. The layered subjects and objects in Emil’s story repeatedly complicate the subject/object relationship that I implicitly create in the process of my analyzing an objectified text. Incongruence between a performed text and an objectified text are manifested in the

struggles to construct a continuous thread of meaning by layering the text over itself. The discontinuity of textual meaning reinforces a theoretical approach towards performance as an experience that reconfigures hegemony by providing a narrated, contextual space to enact counter-hegemonic behavior. We also find a disparity between immediate behavior and narrated behavior in the plot of Aunt Dallas's story.

Dallas had always coveted her mother's beautiful wedding band and, even though it was inherited by Dallas's older sister (Aunt Nelly) upon their mother's death, Dallas assumed that the ring would become hers when Nelly died. However, upon Nelly's death, her daughter (Dallas Louis) claimed the ring on behalf of *her* daughter (Melanie) "who was gonna marry that Hooper boy, who lives down the street, in two weeks," (274). At Nelly's wake, the family decides to get the ring and put it on the corpse because it just wasn't right to see Aunt Nelly without the ring. Then, by mistake, they bury Nelly while still wearing the ring. Dallas Louis insists that the body be dug up so that she can get the ring and give it to her daughter Melanie for her wedding day. After taking the precious band off of Nelly's dead and buried finger, the family prepares for the wedding as planned. The story concludes with Dallas and the rest of the family witnessing the marriage of Melanie and "that Hooper boy". As the ceremony neared its climax, with the preacher commenting on how "fittin and proper" that the two should be married and how wonderful it was that Melanie would wear her great-grandmother's wedding band, Dallas behaves in a manner most unbecoming to a member of a family that values relationships over material things. "Thereupon [Dallas] said,/ in a stage whisper that could be heard throughout the churh,/ Bullshiiit," (378-380).

The juxtaposition of different places is one of the most striking elements of the story. We have the setting of the meta-narrative held constant throughout the story and, from this place, the

deeper performance of two traditionally somber settings: a funeral and a wedding. While these official settings might seem more likely to encourage a certain reverence of the family values, the narrative demonstrates counter-hegemonic behavior in both places. Rather than mourning and remembering Nelly for the relationships she had with the family, the story depicts Dallas and the rest of the family relating to the dead body in terms of material possessions. Rather than rejoicing in the loving marriage of a young family member, Dallas behaves according to her more pressing concerns over the ownership of the ring, eventually disrupting the ceremony when she declares, “Bullshit,” to the entire church. Ultimately, the story establishes and glorifies an alternative hegemony. Because Emil performs Dallas as his “favorite aunt” and the protagonist in the story rather than potentially criticizing and construing her behavior as self-centered or materialistic, their relationship suggests the power of a performance to create new hegemonic values. On the evidence of his generosity towards me and the numerous friends he has around the world, clearly Emil still maintains his family’s value for relationships over material goods. However, the power of his “favorite aunt’s” original performance of this “family story” may have helped instilled a crucial new value in Emil, the value of telling stories.

Analyzing the text of the performance has produced another realization of context. When context transitions from existing as multiple subjective notions in the minds of interacting individuals and becomes an actively created, shared space, it allows the production of new hegemonic values. Herein lies the unique social power of performance. When Emil transitions into performance, our conversational negotiation of context has been drawing our separate notions together until we both agree, in our own subjective ways, to grant him the authority to perform. The collective authority to perform is the authority to creatively define context. “This actually happened,” implies that the interactions of the characters within the performed narrative

world are cemented in the authority of the narrator. If the performance environment has been negotiated by some process that aligns individual preconceptions, then the audience and the performer share the context that gives rise to the actions within the narrative, and this performed contextual space exists based on the representative snapshots of another time or place as presented by the performer. When Emil states, “My Aunt Dallas was my favorite aunt,”(168) all subsequent narrated interactions between he and his aunt occur in the context of a lifelong relationship, which he and only he can define and which I can only believe or not believe.

In the shared time and space of performance, the individual conceptions of self and other as held by performer and audience become obsolete in relation to the actively created narrative world. This is not to suggest that performance induces a non-dualistic worldview, in fact quite the opposite. By performing narrative based on the referential authority that *This actually happened*, reality is defined in more rigidly dualistic terms. That is, the experienced world and the narrated world. In the next section we will examine how the transition into performance creates more than just an ideological or theoretical shift in the nature of context. The believable presentation of the narrated world alters the ontology of the experienced world by affectively situating performer and audience as joint-observers of a shared other.

The Ontologies of Context

Reflexive analysis becomes an infinitely confusing and starkly inadequate tool for recreating the experiential meaning of performance because we are dealing with momentary changes in ontology. In a direct interpersonal sense, the transition between conversation and performance is not a single static shift. Once the performance is transcribed, the shift to performance can easily become a set point, after which everything is performance until some

identifiable conclusion or closing frame. In the immediate experience of a performance, however, the audience maintains identity and authority because the line between performance and non-performance is quite permeable and the transition quite fluid. At any point in time an individual in the audience has the capacity to stop believing what is being performed and shift back out of the narrative world being created by the performer. The process of reinstating disbelief splits the experiential ontology of context back into a dual state as the audience reestablishes his or her own production of narrative. These claims towards ontology are based on the definitions established earlier in this essay: *Performance* is the active creation of an alternative *hegemony* (a collective that determines an individual's sense of how he or she is expected to behave), which only occurs when two or more individuals find a common point in time and space where their behavior adheres to a preconceived model of how they sense they are expected to behave.

Thomas Kasulis, in his book Intimacy or Integrity, refers to “a pattern of practical behavior enacting a preconceived model” as *praxis*. “Praxis is fundamental to intimacy in two respects. First, in cases wherein intimacy involves a person, the intimate relation itself is established only through praxis. [...] The second point about praxis is that intimacy deepens as the praxis is repeated or habitualized.”⁴ Before discussing the terms *Intimacy* and *Integrity* and how they relate to the ontologies of context, let's establish how *performance* fits within this definition of *praxis*. Performance enacts a combination of the ideological and the somatic, but in order for this to be possible in the presence of more than one individual; there must be an overlap between the ideological and the somatic as experienced by each subjectivity. The overlap of the somatic occurs in the occupation of a common place (Emil and I sitting at the same kitchen table), but the overlap of the ideological proves to be far more difficult, requiring the negotiation

⁴ Kasulis, Intimacy or Integrity pg. 43.

of contextual ambiguity discussed earlier. “Only by opening ourselves and trusting that the other will not violate our mutual commitment can we become part of each other. Such is the artistry of interpersonal intimacy.”⁵

Now we need to clarify what is meant by “interpersonal intimacy” and oppositionally, what is meant by “interpersonal integrity”. Kasulis refers to *Intimacy* and *Integrity* as two *cultural orientations*, “two different worldviews, two different ways of understanding the self, and two different ways of constructing value.” He also refers to these different orientations “as a problem in ‘cultural philosophy’”, with each orientation speaking to the question of “how things are related.”⁶ For our purposes here, we will primarily deal with the implications of each orientation on the understanding of interpersonal meaning. The points below outline how each orientation understands the relation of one individual to another and how meaning is made in experience:

Intimacy: -Individuals are related internally.

- Meaning is objective, but personal rather than public.
- Knowledge has an affective dimension.
- Intimacy is somatic as well as psychological.

Integrity: -Individuals are related externally.

- Objectivity is publicly verifiable.
- Knowledge is ideally empty of affect.
- The psychological is distinct from the somatic.⁷

By establishing performance as an overlap between the ideological or psychological and the somatic, this clearly warrants an investigation of the experience through an orientation towards *Intimacy*. It is not so simple to do this, however. First, we should be aware of the

⁵ Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity*, pg 45.

⁶ Kasulis, from Ch. 1 entitled, “Cultural Orientation” pg 13.

⁷ These points are an almost exact paraphrase of what can be found on pgs 24-25, with the exception of the first point. The notion of internal versus external relation can be found throughout the book as a distinction between the two orientations.

disparity between experience and analysis, that the claims made in an essay like this are static representations of the impossibly fluid nature of experience. Second, and perhaps more important, “[the] modern West, at least ideally, has made the commonality of human experience its authority and public verifiability its method. This kind of modernism has tried to replace ignorance, superstition, and inquisition with reason, observation, and justice.”⁸ A modern academic writing in “the West” lives within a culture that privileges *Integrity*. This implies a need to be careful of interpreting culture in a way that can be easily discarded as speculative and dismissed as ignorant. Geertz comments on the fine line the anthropologist must tread when interpreting cultures and particularly when proposing alternative methods: “Nothing will discredit a semiotic approach to culture more quickly than allowing it to drift into a combination of intuitionism and alchemy, no matter how elegantly the intuitions are expressed or how modern the alchemy is made to look.”⁹

First how do we bridge the gap between analysis and experience, connect the logical with the ontological? “Logic requires only that we, not reality, make sense. If an individual or a group misconstrues this relationship and tries to go directly from logic to ontology, only then do we find the situation that someone might want to label “patriarchal,” “hegemonic,” “Western,” or whatever.”¹⁰ We have created a massive logical chain of connected ideas, linking words as integers of constant meaning to make a conclusion: *Performance* facilitates an ontological shift in the nature of *Context*, creating an alternative *Hegemony* from the new, shared contextual space. The reality of this theoretical jibber-jabber is that I can no more remember what actually happened when I was sitting in Emil’s kitchen than I can remember how it felt to be born or graduate high school. Too much happens in the space between one moment of experience and

⁸ Kasulis, pg 33.

⁹ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description” The Interpretation of Cultures, pg 30.

¹⁰ Kasulis, pg 17.

another to assume that any previous experience can be recreated through a logical reconstruction of the past in terms of the relation of its integral parts. “In order for part of the past to be touched by the present instant there must be no continuity between them.”¹¹ This cannot be accomplished through what Dunning refers to as a theoretical interpretation of dialectics. “Dialectic begins with binary opposition. For a theoretical thinker, it remains there.”¹² To continue the logical chain, we must identify how the term *dialectic* fits with *hegemony* and *context*.

“It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various “fields” of any epoch. [...] The very contours of the positive element will appear distinctly only insofar as this element is set off against the negative.”¹³ With dialectic standing as any oppositionally related pair of concepts, it can be thought of as the code through which hegemonic values are communicated. Kasulis uses the analogy of *cultural orientation* as a computers operating system. To continue through this analogy, *hegemony* might function as a single program, a connection between different sets of information that determines how the system expresses itself in response to a certain input. We might think of *context* as the physical expression of encoded information. The *dialectic* is the language in which *hegemonic* expectations are encoded and decoded, a language of binaries, 0’s and 1’s. Thus, any ontological expression of context could be theoretically interpreted as a complex but linear chain of connected binaries. This theoretical interpretation does not imitate ontology any more than a list of 0’s and 1’s imitates the image it manifests when it is decoded within a functioning operating system. It would be impossible, but even if I could communicate a perfect logical connection

¹¹ [N7, 7] of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcade Project*, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” pg 470.

¹² Stephen Dunning, *Dialectical Readings: Three Types of Interpretation*, pg 13.

¹³ Benjamin [N1a, 3] in reference to a “[modest] methodological proposal for the cultural-historical dialectic.” pg 459.

between the experiences of speaking with Emil nearly a year ago and the experience of thinking about it right now, the dialectic code of that logic would not touch the ontology of a past moment.

Benjamin's discontinuous connection to a moment in the past does not occur through the logical deployment of dialectics. "It is important [...] to differentiate the construction of a historical state of affairs from what one customarily calls its 'reconstruction.' The 'reconstruction' in empathy is one-dimensional. 'Construction' presupposes 'destruction'."¹⁴ "Construction" occurs through combining the momentary ontology of the image or the texture of experienced reality with the language of the dialectic. "The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability."¹⁵ In the *dialectic image* we have the tool for connecting the logical with the ontological. The *dialectic image* emerges in a flashing moment of *praxis*, the somatic enactment of a single section of dialectically encoded ideology.

How does the critical interpretation of a cultural text function in terms of *dialectic imagery*? This question might be approached by considering the question of why we think of or make certain logical connections when constructing a critical interpretation of a previous experience. In one sense, what we might possibly think is restricted to a set of hegemonically prioritized dialects. But what we select from this set of potential logical connections also must also resonate somatically. Image is the texture of thought. Some thoughts strike us as intriguing, beautiful, moving or true in the "now of recognizability", others do not. In this respect, a thought is read with the body before it is transcribed into the pure dialectics of written language. The somatic texture of imagined language or verbalized thought provides the foundation for an

¹⁴ Benjamin, [N7,6] pg 470.

¹⁵ Benjamin, [N9,7] pg 473.

intimate relation to the object of analysis; the dialectical building blocks of imagined language provide the foundation of an integral, logical relation to the object of analysis. Analytic interpretation of culture functions on two different systems of meaning: [the intellectual, dialectical or logical] and [the somatic, imagistic or emotional]. The act of transcribing imagined language occurs according to the hegemonic predominance of one cultural orientation over the other and the traditional precedent of particular disciplines of representation.

As a discipline of written representation, ethnography faces a peculiar challenge. “If ethnography produces cultural interpretation through intense research experiences, how is unruly experience transformed into an authoritative written account?”¹⁶ In order to approach this methodological question, we first need to consider what “an authoritative written account” means within a Western academic culture that privileges an *Integrity* orientation towards knowledge. Particularly in the fields of anthropology and cultural analysis, written authority depends up the public verifiability of objectivity and the absence of individual affect in the production of knowledge. This academic orientation towards *Integrity* as a measure of knowledge privileges the dialectic over the image, the intellectual over the somatic, the logical over the emotional. Ethnography might be reduced down to two integral processes: work and writing. The discussion of performance as praxis and now the discussion of analysis functioning through dialectic imagery demonstrate that in both the work and the writing, the observation and the representation, ethnography demands an orientation towards *Intimacy* as well as *Integrity*.

Contemporary ethnography, as an interdisciplinary body of researchers and writers, wrestles with this predicament, the transcription of experience. The evolution of ethnographic methods proceeds through the experimentation with new processes of representation: the experiential authority of the participant-observer, the interpretive authority of a semiotic

¹⁶ James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, ch. “On Ethnographic Authority”, pg 25.

approach, the discursive model that privileges the intersubjectivity and performative context of speech, the polyphonic approach that puts representation of experience in the hands of multiple authors.¹⁷ Within this typology of ethnographic authority, *The Reluctant Storyteller* seeks to establish its authority on what Clifford labels a discursive model. He identifies the challenge to this privileging of intersubjectivity and context. “While [what] ethnographies cast as encounters between two individuals may successfully dramatize the intersubjective give-and-take of fieldwork and introduce a counterpoint of authorial voices, they remain *representations* of dialogue. [...] This displacement but not elimination of monological authority is characteristic of any approach that portrays the ethnographer as a discrete character in the fieldwork narrative.”¹⁸ This critique of “dialogical representation” reveals a certain orientation towards monological representative authority, that the voice of a single writer cannot function on the intersubjective or “intercorporeal” level of fieldwork.¹⁹ Not only is this orientation towards representation not universal, it is not even consistent between the disciplines of Western academia.

*“In our experience, the rays or appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart.”*²⁰

Consider two different pedagogical approaches to representing experience. While taking two writing workshops, one for poetry (through the English Department) the other for critical

¹⁷ These categories are taken from James Clifford’s chapter “On Ethnographic Authority” from The Predicament of Culture. In the chapter he reviews four modes of ethnographic authority, “experiential, interpretive, dialogic, polyphonic”.

¹⁸ Clifford, pg 43-44.

¹⁹ This is a term I’ve only heard used by Katharine Young.

²⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, from the essay “The Poet.”

writing (through the Comparative Studies Department), I became aware of a deep seeded difference in how the student is taught to relate to the text. In considering what it means to be a “good creative writer” versus what it means to be a “good critical writer”²¹, we see two different orientations towards the processes of writing and reading, representing and interpreting. From listening to established, published poets and short fiction writers talk about their craft, they express a common sentiment, which can be characterized as an organic, spontaneous flow of images into words. Of the five well-known poets and fiction writers that spoke with our poetry workshop, everyone has responded in a similar way to questions like, “Did you know where you were going with this before you started?” or, “Was it a deliberate choice to do this or that in your writing?”

Poet Christopher Howell spoke to this common sentiment by quoting a comment made by Gary Snyder on writing poetry, “I write to find out what is on my mind.”²² Howell explained that good poetry starts with an image as opposed to an idea. “Ideas are tyrannical, Aristotelian and propositional.”²³ Ideally, the creative writer explores an image through what he or she writes. Curiosity presides over logic and if a poem ends up making too specific of a logical point, it has been unsuccessful. Howell defined a successful poem (to his credit, with great reluctance) as something that causes a rapid change from one state of consciousness to another. Ultimately, it seems the creative writer feels that it is better not to know too much about how writing happens, where the images come from or how the language falls in to place. Thinking too much or too analytically about the process of creative writing is taboo; logic stifles the flow

²¹ I am referring, primarily, to personal impressions of how its taught, not any grander sense of what these labels mean in a political sense.

²² This quote is taken hear-say from a comment made by poet Christopher Howell during a conversation.

²³ These comments were taken from a conversation, but similar ideas can be found in the preface to Howell’s book Light’s Ladder.

of imagery. Thinking and analyzing the product of the process, however, is not taboo; the ideal creative writing method works dialectically with a method of interpretation.

*Poetry should be read with the body.*²⁴ In one sense, this simply implies that poetry should be read aloud and experienced by the voice and the ears. In a broader sense, the implication is to respond to poetry based on how the language makes you feel, interpreting it on a somatic level. After experiencing the emotional impact of a successful poem, the reader might go back and analyze the poem in order to make associations between what the language does in a certain section and how that language makes the reader feel. The important dialectic to be identified here is the relation between the imagistic and the somatic. *Write with images: read with the body.* A successful interpretation of poetry reinserts the texture of the image into the linguistic dialectics of the poem. Ideal poetic representation of experience is the art transcribing the intimate exploration of an image into language that creates an equally intimate exploration of the image by the reader. Any relation between artist, artwork and audience outside this intimate framework takes place at a secondary level.

“Art is notoriously hard to talk about. [...] Artists feel this especially. Most of them regard what is written and said about their work, or work they admire[,] as at best beside the point, at worst a distraction from it.”²⁵ If we consider creative writing through the lens of “Art as a Cultural System”, the pedagogical ideal aligns with what Geertz refers to as “a commonality in all art.” “[Certain] activities everywhere seem specifically designed to demonstrate that ideas are visible audible and [...] tactile, that they can be cast in forms where the senses, and through the senses the emotions, can reflectively address them.”²⁶ Within academia, and more specifically among the disciplines of representation in the humanities, creative writing has been

²⁴ This is a useful aphorism quoted from a poetry professor at Ohio State.

²⁵ Clifford Geertz, “Art as a Cultural System” pg 109.

²⁶ Geertz, pg 118.

granted the authority to make meaning through the somatic interpretation of the senses and the emotions. Previously, we looked at how the critical interpretation of a text privileges the dialectic side of the *dialectic image*; the creative interpretation of a text privileges the image. Creative orientation towards representation and interpretation avoids the postmodern contestation of monological authority by foregrounding *Intimacy* as the ideal relationship between the individual and the text.

“[...] Unruly experience [is] transformed into an authoritative written account,”²⁷ according to the affective dimension of somatic relation to the text, creating meaning that is objective but personal rather than public. “Postmodernists claim that [the ideals of truth, beauty and morality] do not have an existence ‘out there’ but instead are created or constructed, by us. They are the products of how we think, write, and talk about them.”²⁸ The challenge to contemporary ethnographic authority stems from the proliferation of “postmodern” theorizing within a society that privileges *Integrity* as the predominant orientation towards reality. Critical writing continues to struggle with integrating relativist cultural theory into a practical method of representing cultural texts. Critical texts are still expected to mean something or make a specific point that can be logically defended, explained and publicly verified in their objectivity. If a reader asks, “What does this mean?” in response to a critical essay or an analysis of a cultural text, either the author needs clarify the logic of his or her writing, or the reader needs to familiarize him or herself with the critical theory that the author is familiar with. The success of critical writing relies upon the coherent transcription of a dialectic thought chain into language that recreates a similar logical progression in the mind of the reader. Clearly we have two

²⁷ Refer to footnote 16.

²⁸ A broad characterization of a postmodernist understanding of the ontology and representation, taken from Colin Campbell, “Modernity and Postmodernity” pg 313.

different orientations to textualized experience²⁹. The one orientation (creative writing) has adapted its ideology to legitimize an intimate praxis that integrates the postmodern challenge to transparent, unbiased representation. The other orientation (critical writing) remains stuck in a stalemate between its theory and its practice, stuck on establishing the authority to speak to the ontological through the logical. How might the *Intimacy* of a creative approach to representation and interpretation inform ethnography-based disciplines like Anthropology, Folkloristics and Comparative Cultural Studies?

Taking Geertz's semiotics, as a well known and authoritative approach to interpreting culture, we can see how critical representation gets recast in an *Intimacy* orientation. "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong."³⁰ The main concept to be recast by practicing this approach with a creative, intimate relation is the concept of how to read. Geertz acknowledges the intimate relation between image and experience when analyzing how individuals make meaning during specific representational cultural events. "The slaughter in the cock ring is not a depiction of how things literally are among men, but [...] of how, from a particular angle, they imaginatively are."³¹ To practice Geertz's "ensemble of texts" method through *Intimacy* simply moves the experience of creating ethnographic representation into the same theoretical realm as other cultural experiences that create meaningful "meta-social

²⁹ These characterizations of "creative" and "critical" writing are admittedly subjective or self-centered, based entirely on my understanding of my own experience as a student of the humanities. This being said, there is a fundamental distinction between English and Comparative Studies that warrants the need for two departments and an equally fundamental commonality between the two departments that encourages the interdisciplinary flexibility of the curriculum between the two departments. Both are concerned with representations/interpretations of reality (rather than reality as itself, as might arguably be the concern of departments like Biology or philosophy). The difference between English and Comparative Studies arises in the source of texts and the approach towards understanding them. Comparative Studies often addresses texts concerned with the way reality really is (Science Studies, Religious Studies, Cultural Studies). English as a department (with the possible exception of Folkloristics) focuses on texts that are understood as creative, original and possibly fictional presentations of reality.

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" pg 452.

³¹ Geertz, "Deep Play" pg 446.

commentary”³² by expressing common sentiment or feeling through a social framework that encourages a somatic, emotion-base interpretation by the audience. We have a new basis for ethnographic authority when we accept that its written representation of experience “is not a depiction of how things literally are among men, but [...] of how, from a particular angle, they imaginatively are.”³³

Reinserting the texture of image into the process of writing and reading ethnography establishes authority based on the affective meaning a how a dialectical, logical connection feels in experience. This calls for an expansion of the interpretational praxis that Geertz suggests as the enactment of his semiotic approach to culture. “This is not a plea ... for the neglect of form, but for seeking the roots of form [...] in what I have called elsewhere ‘the social history of the imagination’—that is, in the construction and deconstruction of symbolic systems as individuals and groups [...] try to make some sense of the profusion of things that happen to them.”³⁴

Likewise, the suggested shift into *Intimacy* is not a plea for the neglect of form, but it is a plea to neglect the reconstruction of symbolic systems as the sole authority for commenting on the sense of what things mean during the transient happening of them in experience. Returning to Benjamin’s concept of the *dialectical image* and how it relates to cultural criticism, “[construction] presupposes ‘destruction’” and the discontinuity through which to touch a part of the past with a present instant occurs in the somatic texture of the image.³⁵ Ethnographic authority arises in the transcription of what it feels like to create a logical interpretation or formal reconstruction of the hegemonic systems that determined the context of some moment in the past.

³² A term used to describe the social function of the Balinese cockfight. Geertz, “Deep Play” pg 448.

³³ Refer to footnote 31.

³⁴ Clifford Geertz, “Art as a Cultural System” pg 118.

³⁵ These concepts are quoted and paraphrased from Benjamin’s work “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress.” Refer to footnotes 11 and 14.

The only way that ethnographic representation has the authority to speak to the ontology of the past is if it is written with a sensitivity to how the specific construction of language into a critical, logical statement feels in the immediate ontology of the present. If ethnography is, at best, a “depiction of how things imaginatively are” then the authority of its representation rests on the basis of a shared contextual space from which the author and audience experience a believable narrated world. Critical analysis of ontology depends upon a belief in the logical reconstructions it makes, a personal investment based on how the intellectual processing of information strikes the body. Such a mode of interpretation and representation functions on the publicly verifiable *Integrity* of the static dialectical structure of the text, as well as the personal *Intimacy* of an individual relating to the logic of the text through the texture of experience. This basis for ethnographic authority recasts ethnography as a cultural system, comparable in aesthetic structure and social function to previous discussions of art as a cultural system.³⁶ Now, where do we classify ethnography using the preconceived dialectic between *creative writing* and *critical writing*? It seems that the proposed intimacy between the researcher, the cultural text and the audience requires a new term that places this method somewhere between the polarities of pre-existing disciplinary approaches to representation. I propose the term *Creative Cultural Criticism* in the interest of remaining consistent with the terms already used in this essay, but the term “true fiction” also seems to speak to the inherent creativity of constructing a believable representation of past experience.³⁷

³⁶ I explicitly address ethnography as a cultural system in another paper entitled, “Art and Cockfighting: The Aesthetics of Ethnography as a Cultural System”.

³⁷ “True Fiction” is a term used by James Clifford in the introduction to Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.

Preface to the End

The following and final section of this essay works on the authority of *Creative Cultural Criticism*. “Towards an Affect-based Analysis” was written almost a year before the theoretical musings recorded above and, perhaps more than the any other section, was written as an attempt to make sense of myself to myself. After meeting Emil in the spring of 2007 and recording the transcript of *The Pygmalion Effect* conversation and Aunt Dallas story, I wrote “Negotiating Performance and Contextual Ambiguity” for presentation at a conference. The original version of “Performing Counter-hegemonic Authority” was intended to provide a similar kind of text-based analysis of the performed narrative as I had done in the first section. This final section was written during the summer of 2007, with not much concern towards an intended audience or really any idea of where I was going with my thoughts. “Towards an Affect-based Analysis” was the exploration of a critical gap, a logical dead end. After months of working over and through the same four hundred odd lines of transcribed experience, I could not understand it in terms of why the performance occurred; I could not understand how the text of the conversation and the text of the narrative could be connected based on the specific language of them. A logical dead-end in critical perspective at the time created the grounds for the dialectic image that inspired the theory of “Affect-based Analysis”.

Having nothing more to say about the transcript but feeling discontent and unfinished, I happened to reread a book on Zen philosophy³⁸ while at work one day that summer. “To be authenticated by all things is to effect the molting of body-mind, both yours and others’.” Connecting the non-dualistic interpersonal structure that I read about with the question dilemmas of “context” and “performance” that were rattling around in my head sparked a thought that struck with considerable enough force to inspire me to explore it, to write about it: *A successful*

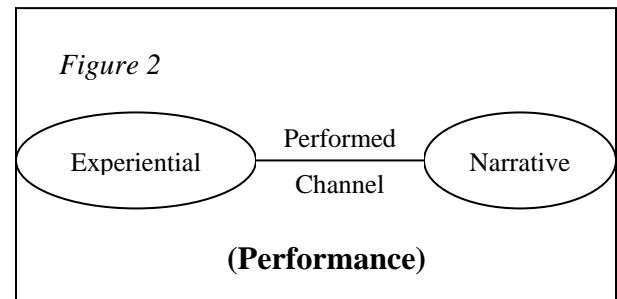
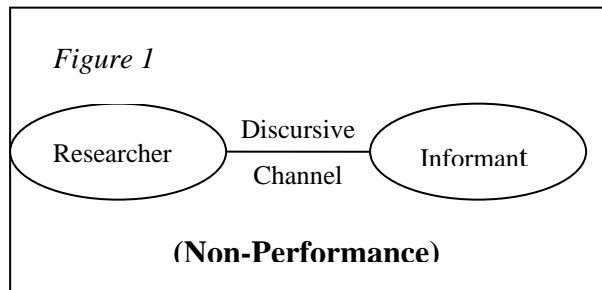
³⁸ The book is *Zen Action/Zen Person*, by Thomas Kasulis.

performance facilitates a fundamental shift in how we relate to the world, how the world relates to us and how the world relates to itself.

Without question, I constructed my own personal theory of “Affect-based Analysis” because I was desperately trying to make some grand, logical conclusions about the nature of context. The writing process was a pure, self-centered conjuring of ideas to fill logical gaps and depended more upon what I could think up as opposed to what I believed to be true or could reference to some authoritative critical theorist. Aided along by a conversation with Professor Kasulis and the introduction to Intimacy or Integrity, I continued to write because I was intrigued by what I was thinking and writing. My curiosity to explore the implications of the idea about a contextual shift compelled an onslaught of thoughts and their transcription into a new written text. As an avid amateur quantum theorist, Zen philosopher and wannabe mystic, the creative freedom of constructing an ontological theory of and for myself played a profound role validating my identity as an ethnographer. My engagement in the ideas I was writing helped me internalize the value of critical theory at the very personal level of how it made me feel about the world. From experience of creating this theoretical projection arose “a new predominant practice and consciousness”, a new hegemony of different dialectical associations. In the months after I finished “An Affect-based Analysis”, I encountered critical theory that resonated with the way I had begun thinking about performance and the ontological shift in context (Kasulis, Geertz, Benjamin, Clifford, Irving Goffman and the inter-subjective approach of folklorists Amy Shuman and Katherine Young). The authority of the critical approach utilized in the preceding sections of *The Reluctant Storyteller* owes equally to the experiences of writing the following section and reading the work of predominant critical theorists as it does to the initial experience of meeting and talking with Emil.

Towards an Affect-based Analysis

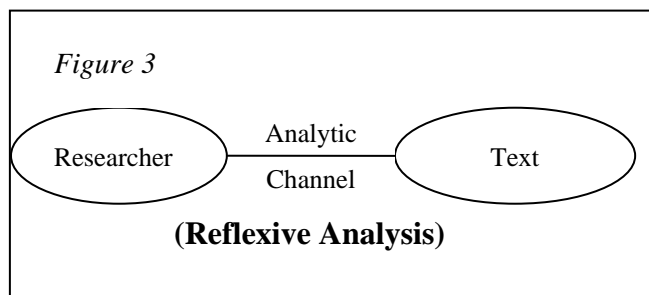
The diagrams below offer a coarse representation of the ontological shift facilitated through performance. *Figure 1*, as a whole, represents the *Experiential* world that will interact with the *Narrative* world in *Figure 2*. In other words, all of *Figure 1* could be understood to be contained within the oval representing the *Experiential* in *Figure 2*. In this mode of analysis, performance maintains the same dualistic orientation and structure as non-performance (two distinct entities connected by an external relationship). Performance acts as a meta-categorization of the experiential; it includes researcher, informant, and the discourse connecting the two but aligns these three concepts in relation to an external narrative. This definition of context depends upon the narrated sense of the other. The basis of non-performance context is the researcher's subjective sense of the informant and vice-versa. The basis of performance context is the shared definition of the narrative world that is performed through the referential authority of the performer.



More critical attention needs to be paid to the verbalization of thoughts in the mind of an individual involved in the experience of performance. Consider the implications of the thought, “Where is he going with this story?” If I think this while sitting in Emil’s kitchen and experiencing a narrative of a different time and place, there is an immediate separation of my self from him and his story and his experience. The space occupied by such internalized narrative

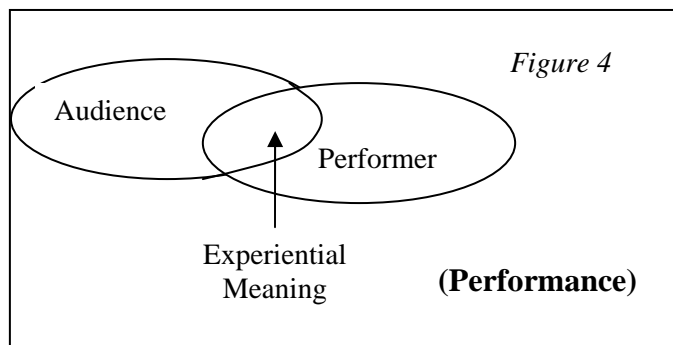
has no distinct physical existence, but the repercussions of this mental activity divide the physical space into a dualistic environment that separates subject and object. He and I (Informant/Researcher) becomes the most consciously dominant verbalized duality rather than us and them (Experiential/Narrative). If the researcher verbalizes narrative in his mind and the researched has no access to that narrative, then surely at least a part of the researcher exists in a space entirely independent of the researched. In the absence of such thought, the conceptual model of *Figure 2* can hypothetically support a non-dualistic ontological existence of context. Before further describing this ontology, it is necessary to consider the disparity between the analytic and the ontological.

The act of recreating experiential meaning through the analysis of an objectified text means the unavoidable objectification of the ethnographer's own subjectivity during the ethnographic experience. *Figure 3* shows a representation of the relation between researcher and text. Such reflexive analysis may be conceptualized as another layer of meta-categorization of the same structure as *Figures 1* and *2*. The textualization of a performance, through recording and transcription, essentially makes a single object out of the components contained in *Figure 2*. This objectified text has several subject/object dynamics within it, which can be analytically separated down to its most integral parts (Researcher/ Informant/ Discourse, Experience/ Narrative/ Performance).



My discussion of context in this essay has functioned on the analytic terms of breaking down the text of an ethnography to its smallest identifiable parts and observing how these parts effect one another through their relation. I have attempted to make meaning by layering the relation between Emil and myself over the relation between our ethnographic encounter and narrative he performed. The confusion of this process stems from the inadequacy of reflexivity to recreate the ontology within which meaning was originally felt.

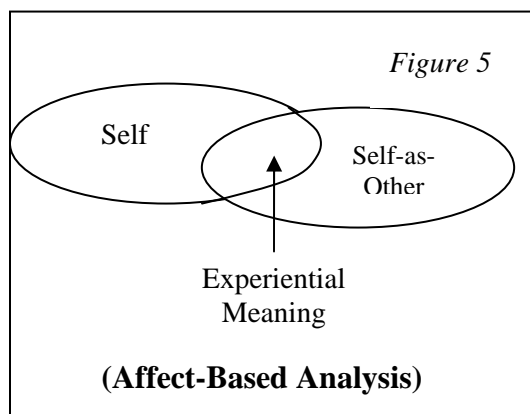
In relating *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* analytically, the independent parts that make up *Figure 1* easily fit into the category of *Experiential* (think of the bar-bell structure of *Figure 1* contained within the first oval of *Figure 2*). Ontologically, this is not the case; difference can only be observed through the verbalization of the relation between independent entities. During a perfectly integrated moment of performance, the performer assumes sole authority to verbalize narrative, and in this absence of verbalization by the audience (either internally during the performance or reflectively during analysis) there is no way to clearly define performer and audience as independent entities. Experiential meaning not only depends on both individual entities, it exists as an internal part of both. The physical ontology of performance might be better represented by *Figure 4*. Preceding definitions of context in terms of a subjective sense of the other no longer apply to this model. Ontologically, there is no other in the share space of *Experiential Meaning*. During performance, when experience itself actively defines context in terms of a narrated other, the affective overlap between audience and performer becomes the only significant source of meaning. For example, a spontaneous laugh and the sense of rapport between narrated characters function as affect or emotion-based forms of meaning. Experiential meaning is not contextually based.



The personal edification or subjective high felt after an ethnographic experience is the most accurate recreation of affective meaning. The affective dimension of experiential meaning is impossible to recreate from an objectified text because such an object implies a strict distinction between the self, the other, and even the self-as-other. Reflexive analysis serves as a useful tool for dissecting performance into its smallest integral parts in order to observe the effects of these parts on one another. At best, this is only half the picture. To represent both the effective and affective dimensions of performed meaning it requires a complimentary system of affective analysis, a system of analysis that does not rely on a clear distinction between the researcher and the text he analyzes.

The creation of analytic meaning displays a similar disparity between its experienced ontology and reflective objectivity as can be found in the case of performed meaning. That is, the immediate experience of my own writing or otherwise verbalizing analysis of a past experience blurs the line between the researcher and the researched. The *Researcher* can be found in both *Figure 1* and *Figure 3* because the ethnographer implicitly verbalizes him or herself as an object when ethnographic experience is analyzed as an objectified text. *Figure 2* depicts the dominant verbalized dichotomy during performance as *Experiential* and *Narrative*. The creation of analysis acts in an analogous manner to this depiction of performance; the *Experiential* (typing at a computer or simply the verbalized mental analysis of a text) is most

relevantly differentiated from the previously *Experienced* or the *Narrated Experience*. From the perspective of this furthest stratum of meta-categorization, binary distinction between [The *Researcher* as the subjective, experiential self] and [The *Researcher* as an object of analysis] becomes obsolete. *Figure 5* offers a depiction of the ontology of the self during the active analysis of an objectified text.



Analytic meaning, in the experiential creation of it, arises from the interdependence of the *Self* and the *Self-as-Other*. Creation of critical analysis offers the same affective potential as the experience of performance; I can find no significant way to distinguish between the emotional rush felt on the drive home from Emil's and the thrill I get when writing something that I believe to be true in an essay like this. In one sense, the analysis of an experience-based text occurs in the context of the original experience; but once again, this is only half the picture at best. Hopefully, when someone else reads the text being created in the momentary experience of my fingers striking these keys, it will support some meaning in relation to the transcribed experience. To say that this objective meaning is the only or even the most important meaning created through the process of my analysis would be to completely overlook the experience of creation. I recognize the affective dimension of creating narrative through analysis because it

provides insight into the affect of the original experience. The study of past affect occurs through the affective experience of the present.

The conclusions stated above concerning the utility of different modes of analysis are primarily based on personal affect or what feels right. A similar ontological commentary can also be found in Emil's statements within the transcribed text concerning *The Pygmalion Effect* and his stated purpose for the performed narrative.

Pygmalion Effect: "People will behave as they sense they are expected to behave."

Purpose of Performance: "[This is] a family story about values and how we behave sometimes contrary to what we've learned, were taught."

These two statements initially seemed to be a paradox, creating two irreconcilable systems for normative behavior: Internalized Values -v- Learned Values. On the one hand, Emil discusses an individual's inability to act contrary to the sense of expectations imposed by the outside world. On the other hand, Emil performs narrative behavior that runs counter to hegemonic norms. *The Pygmalion Effect* acts as the dominant factor in determining behavior in the experiential world. However, the performance of a narrated world allows the co-existence of *Pygmalion*-effected behavior and counter-hegemonic behavior. In his narrative, these two modes of behavior are accommodated in the relation between meta-narrative frame (he and his aunt in her kitchen) and the deeper layer of narrative (his aunt's behavior concerning the ring). These seemingly incompatible models of interpersonal behavior can both be shown true depending on the perspective from which experience is narrated. This point also applies to the two different models of ontology exemplified in the contrast between *Figure 1* (externally connected ovals) and *Figure 4* (overlapping ovals).

In the world of quantum physics, matter can be proven to exist either as particles or waves depending on the experimental method used to analyze it. Even though both ontological states can be verified and utilized depending on the perspective of the observer, the existence of matter in both states at the same time does not correspond with our experiential understanding of the universe. This analogy is very apt to the discussion of the ontological state of context. Context can be shown to exist as 1) multiple subjective notions of independent relatants in a social interaction or 2) a single, shared and actively created space of social interdependence. Neither state represents more truth, neither offers more analytic utility; both can be true depending on the meta-narrative perspective of the observer. In acknowledging that reflective analysis and experiential ontology cannot directly correspond, there is a need to place equal analytic value on the observable effectual nature of interacting objects in a past experience as well as the personally verifiable nature of affect during the creation or act of analysis. In other words, I find it crucial to value both that which may be intellectually verified by an independent observer and that which emotionally affects me as I write. An ethnographer must acknowledge and appreciate both of these theoretical states of context in the pursuit of recreating the experiential meaning of individuals within performance or any other folk interaction that has the ritual potential to affectively change identity.

Bibliography

This essay was, in a very important sense, intended as a personal “experiment in the validity of analyzing static, written texts to recreate the meaning of lived experience.” I felt it more appropriate and useful to analyze my ethnographic experience in terms of the transcribed text because I have a relatively limited background in the vast body of published theory in

Folkloristics, Sociolinguistics, Performance Theory, and other related disciplines. Emil is the primary reference for the first two sections of the essay (*Negotiating Performance* and *Performing Counter-hegemonic Authority*). As such, the only citations within these sections refer directly to the transcript. To the extent it is possible, I tried to use the terms and ideas within my writing based on the definitions of meaning I have acquired through conversations with Emil or from analyzing the transcription. I feel fortunate to have kept in close contact with my friend Emil since the experiences described in this essay, and he has read and reread what I have written at various stages of production.

It would be unrealistic to think that my analysis has been solely based upon my experience with Emil, however. There are several key texts that played a very significant role in the development of my thinking towards ethnographic and critical processes. As mentioned above, a quarter-long independent study with Dr. Margaret Mills produced a series of invaluable conversations based on methodological theory. Of the many texts that two other students and I reviewed with Dr. Mills, Learning How to Ask by Charles Briggs was extremely important in giving me a model for thinking about ethnographic or interview-based sociolinguistics. His illuminating discussion of context caused me to consider the concept in terms of my own experience and served as a jumping off point for my writing. Although I attempted to develop my own, text-based definition of context, there may be some ideas that closely overlap with his writing. *Figure 1* can be seen as a watered-down version of a diagram contained in Learning How to Ask (41).

The diagrams contained within *Towards an Affect-based Analysis* are heavily influenced by the ideas and figures in Intimacy or Integrity. The model of externally related objects used in

Figures 1, 2, and 3 correspond with “Integrity” based orientation that Kasulis outlines in his book; the overlapping oval model corresponds directly with an “Intimacy” orientation.

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TRANSCRIPT

Andy Paluch

Interview Date: 4/30/2007

{23:12}

- 1) *--I take it you were probably the oldest one in this storytelling class,*
- 2) *right?*
- 3) Oh down there, I was
- 4) yes. I yeah, and (umm umm)
- 5) I was I think,
- 6) I forget now how old I was when I went down there.
- 7) I think I was about seventy
- 8) when I started school down there.
- 9) *--Yeah must have been*
- 10) Yeah and (uh) so
- 11) I told my professor that I was the oldest living graduate student.
- 12) *--(mmhmm)*
- 13) Down there.
- 14) With the emphasis was on the word living.
- 15) And (uh)
- 16) she told everybody that.
- 17) She thought that was wonderful.
- 18) She also thought I was a pretty good storyteller, which helped my
- 19) storytelling career considerably.
- 20) That input from her that she thought I was (uh)...
- 21) *--Yeah*
- 22) Meant a whole lot.
- 23) She was my storytelling Pygmalion.
- 24) Everybody in this world needs a Pygmalion.
- 25) *Pygmalion?*
- 26) Yeah.
- 27) Uh it's called,
- 28) it's a psychological principle called the Pygamlion Effect
- 29) that people behave as they sense they are expected to behave.
- 30) *--Right.*
- 31) And that is a pretty important concept,
- 32) I think to me, in any line of work
- 33) or presentation.

- 34) Uh, it is a,
35) I used it in workshops
36) before I retired.
37) Working with supervisors and managers and how to work with people.
38) --(mmhmm)
39) People will behave as they sense they're expected to behave
40) and if the expector gives them a sense that,
41) Hey you're pretty damn good.
42) I like your work.
43) I think you can go here.
44) I think you can do this.
45) That gives them the sense of expectations
46) and they have a tendency to follow that expect...
47) that sense of expectation,
48) and grow because of it.
49) But if they sense from a supervisor or a manager,
50) or if they sense from (uh)
51) anyone else in an interpersonal relationship
52) that we don't think much of you,
53) you're going to behave in a defensive manner,
54) in a negative manner,
55) that sort of thing.
56) Well, that's what I mean.
57) She was my Pygmalion.
58) --(mmhmm)
59) Dr. Joy was.
60) And uh,
61) that means a lot in getting through the world.
62) --Yeah
63) The Pygmalion Effect.
64) *—Especially if you're looking to reinvent yourself, you know...*
65) Sure.
66) Or if you're looking,
67) more particularly
68) if you're looking to influence the behavior of other people.
69) That is a key ingredient in doing it
70) and doing it well.

- 71) And everybody becomes happy with it.
- 72) --Yeah.
- 73) *There's (um)...*
- 74) *some folklorist somewhere (um),*
- 75) *there's kind of a theory that*
- 76) *everyone is performing all the time,*
- 77) *or that life is,*
- 78) *like whatever front you give to the world at any given time*
- 79) *is always, you know, some kind of performance.*
- 80) *Is it,*
- 81) *is that kind of the same thing as what you're saying?*
- 82) Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 83) And you perform according to the way you sense that you're being interpreted.
- 84) --(Right)
- 85) To perform.
- 86) I believe this,
- 87) I believe it in, you know,
- 88) um if you walk into a class and you sense that professor doesn't like you.
- 89) If he senses...
- 90) If you sense that he thinks,
- 91) right or wrongly, that you're just quotes
- 92) average,
- 93) that's probably the way you're going to behave.
- 94) --(right)
- 95) ...
- 96) --Yeah, you know that's (um)
- 97) you can see it in schools with,
- 98) I mean, even younger kids you know.
- 99) Oh sure.
- 100) --This one friend of mine
- 101) that uh he's gonna be an elementary school teacher,
- 102) we'll talk about it sometimes that when you expect a kid to be really smart,
- 103) they end up really smart.
- 104) Or when you have schools where the kids are expected to be,
- 105) you know, trouble-makers,
- 106) not interested in what's going on
- 107) (Yeah)

108) --*That's what happens.*
109) Yeah that to me is.
110) Once I discovered that, uh.
111) Well it came out of Pygmalion,
112) which was written I think by George Bernard Shaw.
113) And Pygmalion was developed into,
114) was a play. And it was developed into a movie.
115) Uh, and then it became "My Fair Lady".
116) --*Really?*
117) Yeah. That was the
118) That was Pygmalion.
119) --*Huh. Pyg...how do you spell...*
120) *What is Pygmalion, how is that?*
121) P-Y-G-M-A-L-I-O-N. Pygmalion.
122) --*(huh)*
123) Yeah look it up on your computer.
124) The Pygmalion Effect
125) and you'll get a lot of information.
126) --*Yeah, huh.*
127) And yeah,
128) I've seen all of them.
129) You know, I've seen the play. I've seen
130) the movie. I've seen
131) the musical. And of course they made the movie out of it.
132) --*Hmm.*
133) *So is there no...*
134) *authentic self then. I guess,*
135) *is there never,*
136) *is there nothing to us that isn't just a, you know,*
137) *a response to the context that we're performing for at that time.*
138) *Uh, that's kind of a...*
139) --*[laugh]*
140) Well *[laughs]*
141) I think, we all
142) perform within the context of where we are
143) and (um) how we view the situation. You know...
144) --*Yeah*

145) Umm...
146) There is a...
147) That brings to mind a family story...
148) about (umm)
149) values
150) and how we behave, sometimes
151) contrary to what we've learned,
152) were taught. And in our family growing up,
153) way back in the Twenties.
154) Umm, one of the values we were taught as children was that
155) (umm) family or relationships
156) should take precedence over material things and goods.
157) And as children we should learn to (uh)
158) put more value on the family and relationships than
159) than on something that you buy at the store, for example.
160) But we don't always behave,
161) we don't always practice what we preach.
162) And that's what this story is about.
163) Uh it's a family story.
164) It's a true story
165) and it happened several years ago
166) with (um)
167) with my Aunt Dallas.
168) My Aunt Dallas is my favorite aunt.
169) She, at that time, was living in Fairborn, Ohio.
170) She was ninety-seven at that time.
171) And um,
172) I was traveling through Fairborn, doing workshops
173) and I'd finished early that day, about three o'clock.
174) And I called her on the phone and said
175) Can I stop, cause you're on the way home and I'd just like to stop in and say hello.
176) And umm...
177) Did I already tell you this story?
178) --No.
179) Okay. I said
180) I'd just like to stop and say hello.
181) And I want you,

182) don't go to any trouble, just fix me a cup of coffee and I'll
183) just stop in and say hello.
184) And she said,
185) Oh sure, come on out.
186) So I stopped and
187) when I got there, she had
188) the table was laden with all sorts of goodies.
189) She'd brought in her two daughters and
190) there was cakes and cookies and coffee and tea and iced tea
191) with lemon and sandwiches and hot
192) she had everything laid out.
193) --[laugh]
194) A feast.
195) A veritable feast.
196) And her two daughters were there.
197) And after we talked for awhile
198) and had some coffee and that,
199) one of her daughters said to her,
200) she said (uh),
201) Mom, tell Emil (um)
202) the story about the ring.
203) --Hmm
204) And she said,
205) I don't,
206) oh he doesn't want to hear that story.
207) And uh,
208) Yes he does Mom, you tell him that story.
209) And she said,
210) Well, alright. And she started.
211) She says,
212) I don't know if you remember my mother,
213) but she was one of the sweetest, dearest things you ever want to meet.
214) And she'd give the shirt right off of her back...
215) if it if she wanted to, it made you feel better.
216) --(huh
217) And and, I said,
218) I didn't know her.

219) And she said
220) Well,
221) she would do that and I want you to know that she had a ring
222) that was one of the most beautiful wedding bands that I'd ever seen.
223) It was white gold about uh
224) an inch wide and it was engraved with hearts and flowers and cherubs and the date of
their,
225) my mother's wedding, inside.
226) And she said,
227) I always knew,
228) I always thought that someday,
229) if I was the oldest one in the family
230) and my mother died, I would be entitled to that ring.
231) Don't you think so?
232) And I said
233) Well I certainly do.
234) --(laugh)
235) And she said
236) Well that's not what happened.
237) I said,
238) Well, what happened?
239) She said,
240) Well, when your Aunt Nelly died
241) that was her sister,
242) about two months ago.
243) She said,
244) The minute she d...
245) Well, to back up a little bit.
246) She said
247) When you're Aunt Nelly got married, way back when,
248) to Andrew.
249) They didn't have a nickel to their name to rub against one another
250) and she took that, my mother,
251) who would give you the shirt right off of her back,
252) took that ring of her finger and gave it to my sister Nelly,
253) so she could get married to Andrew.
254) She said,

255) And she'd worn that ring ever since then.
256) And I always thought if Nelly ever died
257) then I would be the oldest member of that family
258) and I should get that ring.
259) Don't you think so?
260) And I said,
261) I certainly do.
262) --(Laugh)
263) Well that's not what happened.
264) I said,
265) Well, what happened?
266) She said,
267) Well, when your Aunt Nelly died,
268) about two months ago,
269) before the body was even cold,
270) she said,
271) her daughter, Dallas Louis,
272) took that ring right off of her finger
273) and told everybody that she was going to give it to her daughter Melanie,
274) who was gonna marry that Hooper boy, who lived down the street, in two weeks.
275) --Hmm
276) And she says,
277) And I always thought that ring ought to belong to me then
278) because I was the oldest living member of the family.
279) She was ninety-seven at the time.
280) I said,
281) I certainly do.
282) And well she said,
283) That's not what happened.
284) She said,
285) When they laid Nelly out in the funeral home
286) we all went down to visit and on visitation time.
287) She said,
288) She was laying there in her casket and everybody said,
289) Well she looks awful nice but she doesn't look quite right. What's wrong?
290) Well, they said,
291) She's not wearing that ring.

292) Well what happened to that ring?
293) Well she said,
294) Dallas Louis gave it to her daughter Melanie who's gonna marry that Hooper boy, who
lives down the street, in two weeks.
295) Well, she said,
296) I'll go up and get that ring,
297) and I'll get that and put it on Nelly
298) so she'll look right laying there in the casket for the next three days.
299) She says,
300) And that's what happened.
301) They put that ring on Nelly.
302) She, everybody said she looked good
303) and we just went on.
304) She said,
305) And the funeral came
306) and we all,
307) she said,
308) and we, we all went
309) and buried Nelly at that Grandview
310) Cemetery,
311) out way on the outskirts of town.
312) And we all went back after the funeral
313) to the big feast that everybody always does in our family.
314) Everybody comes and we have a big feast
315) to celebrate the life of the one who had died.
316) And she said,
317) Well, everybody's sittin up there having a good time,
318) talkin, and chattin.
319) And somebody said all of a sudden,
320) Dallas, did the undertaker give you that ring?
321) Dallas Louis said,
322) No, he didn't give me the ring.
323) Did he give you the ring?
324) No, he didn't give me the ring.
325) And she said,
326) Oh my god,
327) they buried the ring with Nelly.

328) --[*laugh*]
329) And she said,
330) I've got to have that ring to give to my daughter Melanie [*laughing*],
331) who's gonna marry that Hooper boy who lives down the street, in two weeks.
332) [*laughing*]
333) So she said,
334) I'm gonna hop down there...
335) Dallas-Louis says,
336) I'm going down there to the undertaker, and we're gonna dig up Nelly...
337) --(*oh goodness*)
338) ...tomorrow.
339) And we're going to get that ring.
340) And she said,
341) That's exactly what they did.
342) They reached down, they dug up Nelly
343) and they opened up that casket
344) and they took that ring off of her finger and give it to her daughter Melanie,
345) who's gonna marry that Hooper boy who lives down the street in two weeks.
346) --[*laugh*]
347) She said,
348) Well, and I always thought that ring would belong to me.
349) Don't you think so?
350) Well, I certainly do.
351) Well, that's not what happened.
352) --[*Laugh*]
353) She said, We all went to the funeral...
354) or not,
355) we all went to Melanie's wedding.
356) --*Right*
357) She said,
358) It was a hot day.
359) She said,
360) We were sittin there waiting on
361) everything to happen and
362) fanning ourselves.
363) And it was hot, my it was hot in the church.
364) She said,

365) Finally the minister come out and said,
366) Dearly beloved,
367) we're gathered here today
368) in the sight of God
369) to bring together in holy matrimony,
370) this young man and this young woman.
371) But before we begin, it's fittin and proper
372) that we say that this wedding today is doubly blessed
373) because it has the ring
374) that has been handed down from generations and generations
375) in this family
376) and it's finally fitting and proper it comes to rest on the finger of our lovely bride,
377) Melanie
378) And one of the daughters said,
379) And thereupon Mom said,
380) in a stage whisper that could be hear throughout the church,
381) Bullshiiit
382) --[*Laugh*]
383) [Laughing] And and,
384) my Aunt Dallas said,
385) Oh now I didn't say that.
386) --[*Laugh*]
387) And her daughter said,
388) Yes you did Mom. Yes you did.
389) And she said,
390) Well, maybe I did,
391) but I didn't say it that loud.
392) [both laughing]
393) So that's a family story and
394) it's a true story and (uh)
395) it shows we don't always behave like we are taught.

{39:03}